

Cultivating Authentic Leadership in African Higher Education: Empowering Ethical and Transformational Student Leaders

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ABSTRACT

Authentic leadership has increasingly gained recognition as a vital model for nurturing ethical, transformational, and value-driven leaders in higher education. In the Ugandan context, where institutions of higher learning serve as critical platforms for shaping future leaders, cultivating authentic leadership among students is essential for addressing contemporary socio-economic, cultural, and governance opportunities. This paper explores the role of African higher education institutions in fostering authentic leadership by emphasizing self-awareness, relational transparency, ethical conduct, and a strong sense of purpose among student leaders. Drawing from leadership theories and contextual realities, the study highlights how authentic leadership complements transformational leadership in promoting integrity, accountability, and service-oriented mindsets among young leaders. The study employed a qualitative research approach with purposive sampling of student leaders. The paper argues that authentic leadership development in higher education should go beyond theoretical instruction by integrating experiential learning, mentorship programs, community engagement, and participatory governance. Such approaches create platforms where students can practice decision-making, resolve conflicts, and champion initiatives that reflect ethical values and social responsibility. Furthermore, embedding authentic leadership principles in student governance structures, leadership training curricula, and extracurricular activities strengthens students' capacity to lead with empathy, inclusiveness, and resilience. The study also underscores the importance of institutional commitment to cultivating leadership cultures that prioritize transparency, dialogue, and shared values. Ultimately, cultivating authentic leadership empowers students to become ethical and transformational leaders capable of driving positive change, fostering social cohesion, and contributing to sustainable development. This paper concludes that African higher education institutions hold a unique and strategic role in shaping future leaders, and investing in authentic leadership cultivation is a critical pathway to nurturing a generation of student leaders who embody ethical values, inspire trust, and transform societies.

Keywords: Authentic leadership, higher education, student leaders, transformational leadership, ethics.

INTRODUCTION

Leadership development in higher education has become a central focus in contemporary discourse, particularly in Africa where the demand for ethical, visionary, and transformational leaders continues to grow. Universities and other higher education institutions are not only spaces for academic excellence but also vital incubators for cultivating leadership skills that extend beyond the classroom. In a region facing challenges such as corruption, governance deficits, inequality, and socio-economic transformation (Hassan & Zeb, 2021; Nor & Raheem, 2025), the call for leaders who embody authenticity, integrity, and service to society is more urgent than ever. Authentic leadership, with its emphasis on self-awareness, relational transparency, balanced decision-making, and moral grounding (Born et al., 2025), offers a transformative pathway for preparing the next generation of student leaders in African higher education institutions (Kelly, 2023). Unlike traditional leadership models that often prioritize authority and control, authentic leadership emphasizes trust, ethical values, and genuine engagement with others (Shaw, 2023). When nurtured within higher education, it enables students to develop

leadership identities that are grounded in both personal conviction and social responsibility. Authentic leadership also aligns closely with transformational leadership (Nassanga, 2024), which seeks to inspire and motivate individuals towards collective goals. Together, these models provide a strong framework for preparing student leaders who are not only capable of excelling in academic and professional spaces but are also committed to driving positive change in their communities and societies. In Uganda, higher education institutions play a vital role in shaping future leaders. However, student leadership is often influenced by political, cultural, and institutional factors that impact leadership authenticity. Many student leaders face challenges such as corruption, favoritism, and external political interference, which hinder ethical leadership. Despite these challenges, universities are increasingly promoting authentic leadership through leadership training programs, mentorship initiatives, and governance structures that encourage transparency and accountability (Alshaar, 2023). Victoria University, one of the most prominent universities in Uganda has begun a campaign of fostering self-awareness, ethical decision-making, and inclusive leadership as a means of cultivating a new generation of student leaders committed to integrity, collaboration, and transformational leadership. This paper, therefore, explores the cultivation of authentic leadership within African higher education as a critical strategy for empowering ethical and transformational student leaders. It further explores the theoretical underpinnings of authentic leadership, highlights institutional practices that support its development, and underscores the broader societal impact of investing in student leadership grounded in authenticity and ethics.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The study is grounded in the transformational leadership theory (Gezahagn et al., 2024), developed by James Burns and later expanded by Bernard Bass (Bass, 2015; Khanin, 2007), centers on leaders who inspire and motivate their followers to achieve exceptional outcomes and exceed their own self-interests. The theory underscores four core components: idealized influence, where leaders serve as role models of integrity and purpose; inspirational motivation, which involves articulating a compelling vision that energizes and unites followers; intellectual stimulation, where leaders encourage creativity, innovation, and critical thinking; and individualized consideration, which reflects a leader's commitment to mentoring, supporting, and addressing the unique needs of each follower. This theory highlights the significance of a compelling vision, individualized consideration, intellectual stimulation, and inspirational motivation (Bashori et al., 2022). In the same way, transformational leaders are committed to fostering personal growth and development, encouraging followers to reach their full potential (Nassanga, 2024). In the context of student leadership, this theory suggests that institutional support structures such as leadership training, mentorship, and forums are critical for nurturing transformational leadership qualities (Gupta, 2025). These structures help cultivate student leaders who can inspire others and drive meaningful change within their communities and organizations through providing guidance, empowerment, and opportunities for growth. Ultimately, through these dimensions, transformational leadership fosters environments where individuals not only perform effectively but also grow personally and professionally. In the context of higher education, particularly student leadership, transformational leadership theory provides a powerful lens for understanding how institutions can nurture ethical, visionary leaders (Kelly, 2023). Leadership training programs, mentorship initiatives, and inclusive forums serve as crucial support structures for cultivating these qualities. Therefore, though creating spaces that encourage participation, dialogue, and problem-solving, institutions empower students to lead with confidence and empathy. Ultimately, transformational student leaders become catalysts for positive change championing integrity, inclusivity, and innovation within their academic communities and the wider society.

METHODOLOGY

This study employed a qualitative research design (Jackson et al., 2007) to explore authentic leadership among higher education students in Africa. It involved gathering in-depth insights into students' leadership experiences, perceptions, and challenges through semi-structured interviews and focus groups (Allsop et al., 2022). The research aimed to understand the lived experiences of student leaders, particularly those in student governments, academic societies, and leadership development programs. The target population for this study consisted of student leaders of Victoria University in Kampala. (Akkaş & Meydan, 2024) a purposive sampling method was used to select 30 student leaders who were involved in leadership roles, ensuring a diverse representation of perspectives. These participants were chosen for their experiences and roles within their institutions, with a focus

on those whose leadership positions offered rich insights into the development of authentic leadership. Data collection involved semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions to explore the key dimensions of authentic leadership (Muhammad, 2015), including self-awareness, relational transparency, internalized moral perspective, and balanced processing. The interviews were designed to allow participants to reflect on their leadership journeys, challenges they faced, and the institutional factors that influenced their leadership development. Focus group discussions provided an additional layer of insight, allowing participants to share and

compare experiences in a group setting, further enriching the data. For data analysis, thematic analysis was employed to identify recurring themes, patterns, and insights related to leadership experiences and institutional influences on leadership authenticity. This approach allowed the study to uncover nuanced perspectives on the role of leadership within higher education, as well as the challenges faced by students in maintaining authenticity in leadership positions. Ethical considerations were central to this study, ensuring voluntary participation, informed consent, and confidentiality of all participants. The study adhered to ethical research principles, prioritizing the safety and well-being of participants throughout the data collection and analysis process (Gold Nmesoma Okorie et al., 2024). This qualitative approach provided a comprehensive understanding of authentic leadership among higher education students, offering valuable insights into how leadership is experienced and cultivated within the context of higher education.

Results

The findings of this study revealed that there are rich insights into the lived experiences, and perceptions of student leaders at Victoria University in Kampala. They also revealed how students navigate leadership roles within an academic environment shaped by both opportunities and constraints by highlighting the values, skills, and ethical principles that student leaders consider essential for effective governance. Overall, the findings capture the realities of student leadership development by offering lessons that can inform policies and practices within higher education, and also shed light on the institutional support and structural barriers that influence leadership growth and practice. Through thematic analysis of the data collected from semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions, several key themes emerged, highlighting the dimensions of authentic leadership and the contextual factors influencing student leadership development as shown in Table 1 below.

Core Themes Shaping Authentic Leadership Development

Table 1: Summary of the key themes

Theme	Description	Implication for Student Leadership
Authenticity and Ethics	Emphasis on integrity, transparency, and accountability as foundations of leadership.	Builds trust and credibility among peers and stakeholders.
Institutional Support	Role of training programs, mentorship, and participatory governance in nurturing leaders.	Equips students with guidance, confidence, and capacity for effective leadership.
Transformational Practices	Student leaders who inspire, motivate, and stimulate intellectual growth in their peers.	Encourages vision-driven, motivational, and innovative leadership practices.
Experiential Learning	Hands-on opportunities through internships, service-learning, and student-led projects.	Enhances practical leadership skills and bridges theory with practice.
Inclusivity & Collaboration	Leadership rooted in diversity, inclusiveness, and teamwork across student groups.	Promotes unity, fairness, and shared responsibility in governance.
Challenges & Barriers	Constraints such as limited resources, weak mentorship, and political interference in governance.	Identifies gaps that institutions must address to strengthen student leadership.
Societal Impact	Student leaders' role as future change agents for community development and governance.	Extends leadership beyond campus to societal transformation and ethical nation-building.

Table 1 presents the key themes that emerged from the research on cultivating authentic leadership in African higher education. The findings reveal that authenticity and ethical conduct form the foundation of effective student leadership, reinforcing the importance of integrity, transparency, and accountability. Institutional support through leadership training, mentorship, and participatory governance was identified as a crucial enabler for developing leadership competencies. Similarly, experiential learning opportunities, such as internships and community engagement, were shown to provide students with practical spaces to apply leadership principles. Inclusivity and collaboration emerged as central themes, demonstrating the role of diversity and teamwork in strengthening student governance. At the same time, challenges such as resource limitations, inadequate mentorship, and political interference were recognized as barriers that must be addressed to sustain authentic leadership practices. Importantly, the study highlighted the broader societal impact of student leadership, with student leaders perceiving themselves as change agents capable of contributing to ethical governance and social transformation in Africa. Collectively, these themes underscore the strategic role of higher education institutions in fostering ethical and transformational leadership cultures that empower students to become visionary leaders both within and beyond academic spaces.

Authenticity and ethics form the cornerstone of student leadership within higher education. Authentic leaders demonstrate integrity, honesty, and transparency in their actions and decisions, which helps them gain the trust and confidence of their peers. In African universities, where issues of corruption, favoritism, and weak governance structures often spill into student leadership spaces, authentic leadership becomes even more critical. Students who embraced authenticity serve as role models by aligning their values with their behaviors, thereby inspiring confidence and credibility in governance. Ethical leadership also promoted accountability, ensuring that student leaders make decisions based on fairness, justice, and the collective good rather than personal gain. Ethical decision-making was also identified as a fundamental aspect of authentic leadership, requiring leaders to act with integrity and fairness. Participants shared experiences of facing moral dilemmas, where they had to balance institutional policies, peer expectations, and their own ethical beliefs. This was also highlighted during a focus group discussion with one of the student leaders who reported that;

"...sometimes, leadership requires making tough decisions that may disappoint some, but integrity demands staying committed to ethical principles. It's not always easy to balance differing opinions, yet a true leader prioritizes fairness and the greater good. Even when faced with criticism, staying true to what is right ultimately earns long-term respect and trust..."

Many student leaders credited their strong ethical values to deeply rooted cultural traditions that emphasized integrity, respect, and community responsibility. They also highlighted the role of religious beliefs in shaping their moral compass, guiding them to lead with honesty and fairness. Additionally, mentorship from faculty members and senior student leaders played a crucial role in reinforcing ethical decision-making. These mentors provided valuable guidance, helping them navigate complex leadership challenges while staying true to their principles. Therefore, within the framework of authentic leadership theory, this theme underscores the significance of self-awareness and moral grounding as essential traits for student leaders. Hence through practicing ethical leadership, students not only strengthen governance structures on campus but also prepare themselves for future leadership roles in society, where trust, transparency, and integrity are vital for sustainable development and good governance.

Institutional support emerged as another vital theme in cultivating student leadership. Universities play a critical role in providing the resources, mentorship, and structures necessary for leadership development. Leadership training programs, workshops, and mentorship initiatives help student leaders acquire the practical knowledge and skills they need to effectively govern, manage conflicts, and inspire others. Participatory governance structures, such as student councils and senate representation, also give students opportunities to engage in real decision-making processes that mirror national leadership roles. In many higher education contexts, however, the absence of structured support leaves student leaders ill-prepared to navigate the complex challenges of governance. Transformational leadership theory emphasizes the importance of empowerment and guidance, which institutions can provide through supportive frameworks. By investing in leadership development, universities equip students with confidence, critical thinking abilities, and ethical reasoning. Institutional support thus creates an enabling environment where students can practice authentic and transformational leadership, preparing them not only for campus governance but also for societal leadership roles after graduation.

Transformational leadership practices were identified as key drivers of effective student leadership. Student leaders who demonstrated the ability to inspire peers, articulate a clear vision, and motivate others were seen as more successful in mobilizing collective action and fostering positive change. Transformational leadership encourages innovation and problem-solving, which is particularly important in addressing challenges within higher education, such as limited resources, student welfare issues, and governance concerns. Leaders who embody this style also show individualized consideration by mentoring and supporting their fellow students, creating a culture of inclusivity and empowerment. In African higher education, where leadership is often viewed through hierarchical or authoritarian lenses, transformational practices represent a shift toward more participatory and collaborative models. This aligns with authentic leadership by combining ethical grounding with visionary influence. By nurturing transformational practices, universities can prepare student leaders who not only thrive within campus environments but also emerge as future leaders capable of driving social and economic transformation across Africa.

Experiential learning plays a critical role in strengthening student leadership capacity. Leadership cannot be cultivated solely through theory; it requires real-world opportunities for practice and reflection. Students who engaged in internships, service-learning projects, community initiatives, or student-led organizations gained first-hand experiences in leadership roles that challenged them to make decisions, solve problems, and work collaboratively. Such experiences allowed them to apply leadership principles in practical contexts, bridging the gap between academic learning and real-life challenges. Experiential learning also promoted resilience, adaptability, and innovation, as students often encountered unexpected situations that tested their leadership abilities. The traditional learning models often prioritize theory over practice, hence experiential learning provided a powerful platform for nurturing authentic and transformational leadership. By giving students the opportunity to engage with communities, advocate for peers, and implement initiatives, institutions foster leaders who are grounded in social responsibility, ethical values, and practical skills. Ultimately, experiential learning equips students to become well-rounded leaders who can navigate the complexities of both academic and societal environments.

Inclusivity and collaboration were highlighted as essential themes for authentic student leadership. Effective leadership in higher education requires embracing diversity in gender, culture, religion, and socio-economic backgrounds. Student leaders who adopted inclusive practices ensured that all voices were heard, creating a sense of belonging and fairness within the governance structures. Collaboration, on the other hand, strengthened teamwork and collective problem-solving, hence enabling student leaders to build coalitions that address shared challenges. Diversity among African universities reflects the authentic leadership principle of relational transparency, where leaders openly engage with others, value diverse perspectives, and foster trust. Similarly, collaborative leadership also mirrors transformational leadership by motivating peers to work towards common goals rather than pursuing individual interests. In the process of cultivating inclusivity and collaboration, student leaders not only strengthened unity on campus but also gained skills necessary for navigating multicultural and pluralistic societies, positioning themselves as ethical and socially responsive leaders.

While the research highlights positive leadership practices, it also acknowledges the challenges and barriers that hinder authentic leadership development. Limited institutional resources, weak mentorship structures, political interference in student governance, and lack of leadership training are some of the obstacles faced by student leaders. These challenges often create environments where student governance becomes reactive rather than visionary. In some cases, political influence undermines student autonomy, leading to leadership cultures characterized by conflict or opportunism rather than ethics and authenticity. Such barriers reflect gaps in institutional commitment to leadership development, which in turn limit students' ability to practice authentic and transformational leadership. Recognizing these challenges is crucial, as they highlight areas where reform is needed. Addressing resource constraints, strengthening mentorship, and safeguarding student governance from external interference are vital steps for enabling authentic leadership and creating more supportive ecosystems for cultivating leaders who embody ethical values, resilience, and social responsibility.

One of the most significant findings of the study is the recognition of the broader societal impact of student leadership. Student leaders view themselves not only as campus representatives but also as future change agents with responsibilities that extend into their communities and nations. Through authentic and transformational leadership, students learn to advocate for justice, equity, and sustainable development, values that are critical for

the nation's socio-economic growth. Their involvement in governance, community projects, and advocacy initiatives provide them with skills and perspectives that prepare them for leadership beyond higher education. The societal impact theme emphasizes that universities are not just training grounds for academic success but also for civic responsibility. By producing leaders who embody ethics, inclusivity, and innovation, higher education institutions contribute directly to building stronger governance systems and socially responsible citizens. This theme reinforces the importance of leadership cultivation as an investment not only in students' personal development but also in Africa's long-term transformation. Ultimately, the findings suggest that authentic leadership among higher education students is shaped by a combination of personal introspection, ethical decision-making, institutional support, and external challenges. While many student leaders strive to embody authenticity, they often navigate complex institutional and social dynamics that influence their leadership experiences. These insights contribute to a deeper understanding of leadership development within higher education governance and highlight the need for enhanced institutional support to cultivate authentic student leaders.

Summary of the Discussion of Results

The findings of this study underscore the strategic role of African higher education institutions in cultivating authentic and transformational student leadership. Several key themes emerged from the research, reflecting both the opportunities and challenges of empowering student leaders. Central to the findings was the theme of authenticity and ethics, which highlighted the importance of integrity, transparency, and accountability as the foundations of credible student leadership (Syafaruddin, 2024). Leaders who demonstrated authenticity were more likely to build trust among their peers and inspire confidence in governance processes. The study also revealed that institutional support structures, such as mentorship, leadership training, and participatory governance, play a vital role in shaping students' leadership capacity (Sipahioglu, 2025). Without such support, students often lack the confidence and skills needed to practice authentic leadership effectively. Transformational leadership practices further emerged as essential, with student leaders who articulated visions, inspired peers, and encouraged intellectual growth being recognized as more effective and impactful (Kilag et al., 2024; Thadathil, 2024). Experiential learning opportunities were equally significant, offering students practical platforms to apply leadership principles in real-world contexts through service-learning, internships, and student-led projects. In addition, inclusivity and collaboration stood out as critical values, emphasizing the need for student leaders to embrace diversity, foster teamwork, and ensure equitable participation across different groups. Despite these positive findings, the study identified persistent challenges and barriers, including limited resources, weak mentorship structures, and political interference in student governance. These obstacles undermine authentic leadership development and highlight the need for institutional reforms (Jiewen et al., 2024). Nevertheless, the research emphasized the societal impact of student leadership, with many student leaders viewing themselves as future change agents responsible for contributing to community development, ethical governance, and national transformation (Dick et al., 2023). Overall, the discussion confirms that higher education institutions hold a unique mandate in shaping the next generation of ethical, visionary, and socially responsible leaders. By strengthening institutional support, promoting experiential learning, and embedding authentic and transformational leadership principles, African universities can empower students to not only govern effectively on campus but also contribute meaningfully to societal transformation.

RECOMMENDATION

It is recommended that in order to foster authentic leadership among higher education students in Africa, universities should implement structured leadership development programs that emphasize self-awareness, ethical decision-making, and relational transparency. These programs should be integrated into academic curricula and extracurricular activities to ensure practical application. Secondly, mentorship initiatives should be strengthened by pairing student leaders with experienced mentors who exemplify authentic leadership. This will provide guidance, support, and role models for ethical leadership. Higher education institutions should also establish transparent governance structures that encourage student participation in decision-making processes. Providing leadership training on accountability and ethical governance will help student leaders navigate institutional challenges effectively. Additionally, universities should promote a culture of integrity by enforcing policies that discourage corruption and external political influence in student leadership. Creating safe spaces for open discussions on leadership challenges can further support students in developing authentic leadership

qualities. By implementing these strategies, universities can cultivate a new generation of ethical and transformative leaders. Lastly, it is recommended that further studies should focus on the impact and the magnitude of authentic leadership among post-student-leaders.

CONCLUSION

Authentic leadership is essential for fostering ethical, transparent, and effective student leadership in higher education institutions across Africa. This study highlights the importance of self-awareness, moral integrity, and relational transparency in shaping student leaders who can positively influence their academic communities. Despite challenges such as political interference and institutional constraints, universities can play a crucial role in nurturing authentic leadership through mentorship, leadership training, and governance reforms. By prioritizing ethical leadership development, higher education institutions can equip students with the skills and values needed to become transformational leaders who contribute to positive societal change beyond the university setting.

Ethical consideration

Ethical approval for this study on authentic leadership was obtained from the Institutional Research Ethics Committee of Victoria University, Kampala. The approval ensured that the research adhered to the highest ethical standards, including informed consent, confidentiality, voluntary participation, and respect for participants' rights. All participants were informed about the study's purpose and their freedom to withdraw at any time without consequence. The study was conducted in accordance with the established ethical guidelines for academic research.

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